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## *Living Room*

'a critical reflection'

presented

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## Introduction - Isabel Jones and Kevin Hodgetts



Living Room Manchester 2002



Living Room Nottingham 2005

Salamanda Tandem<sup>1</sup> and Arty Party Telford<sup>2</sup> were brought together by Kevin Hodgetts, who has been involved as a disability arts officer commissioning work from Salamanda Tandem for a number of years; drawn to ST's principles, philosophy and practice, his observations as participant in and as curator of the work have enabled a deep mutual understanding to occur, leading to some serious experimentation taking place between the company's. Today we want to talk about 'Living Room', one of several experiments but one of particular significance to us.

The Living Room is an ongoing performance research project developed and conceived by Salamanda Tandem in 1996<sup>3</sup>. It's ever changing; a playful, responsive and interactive environment, where live processing, sampling, digital interfaces and visuals set the scene for a variety of performance interventions incorporating dance, film and music. Over the years, people with learning disabilities have made the living room their own, using their bodies and voices to generate and transform it into a unique and personal space. Since 2001 it has

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<sup>1</sup> Salamanda Tandem is contemporary performance company est. 1989 and based in the East Midlands. Its work tours regionally, nationally and internationally developing audiences through access to high quality art works, training in creativity and participation

<sup>2</sup> Arty Party is a long term creative project for people with learning disabilities and was founded in the year 2000 with the support and guidance of Telford & Wrekin's Arts Team

<sup>3</sup> Living Room was originally developed by salamanda tandem with Dance In Greater Manchester in 1996 from a concept devised with dancer / choreographer Lee Parkinson. The culmination of that development happened in 2001/02.

also been supported by the Arts Work With People Project (A:W:P)<sup>4</sup> as a focus for the development of artists and care professionals who work with disabled people. In 2006 Kevin and Arty Party joined the project and together we began to look at practical ways in which learning disabled members of Arty Party could *make personal* their contribution to art projects without having to *stand alone* as non-supported individuals.



Living Room Manchester 2002

Salamanda Tandem make a habit out of inventing strange worlds and new types of experience. They are a company committed to using art as a journey of estrangement: to make us think more deeply about the world around us, or, more likely, to unsettle our common sensical understanding of the world to the point where thought is no longer an acceptable or useful currency. Their facilitative work is always about shifting the rules of engagement to the point where disabilities are no longer disadvantages. Arty Party Telford is an arts organisation committed to exploring new modes of performance for people with learning disabilities. They collaborate with other artists to produce work that does justice to the creativity, integrity and spirit of its members.

Living Room started as an idea for a purer, less-directional, less-imposed type of performance. It ended up challenging all that we knew or thought we knew about what performance and good art really is.

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<sup>4</sup> A:W:P is a collaboration between the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds and Salamanda Tandem, committed to the professional education of artists and care professionals working with people who have severe access needs.

## Part 1: - What is socially engaged arts practice?

Kevin Hodgetts

I have two definitions:

1. Art that is interested in society and the people in it. This is art as social commentary, art that takes on a responsibility to lived experience, art as a witness to events.
2. Art that is achieved in collaboration with non artists.

Socially engaged arts practice in this second definition bridges the separation between practicing artists and the 'everyday creativity' of social members.

Creativity as vocation / deliberate planned acts

Vs

Creativity as inherent and an essential part of life

Of course, this is not to say that individuals who are not practicing artists are incapable of deliberate, planned and accomplished art – just that they are not trained for this and generally speaking this mode of creativity is the preserve of specialists.

But another order of creativity – we can think of it usefully as creative interference – can be equally exciting and productive. This is a way of achieving socially engaged arts practice positioning non-specialists (or having them position themselves) as active agents influencing critical moments in a collaborative whole.

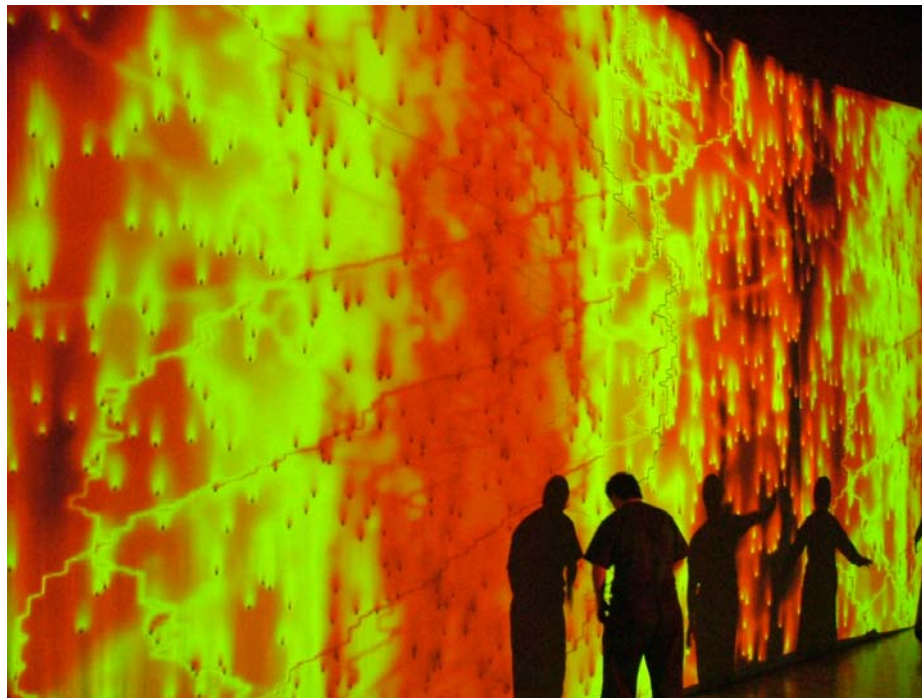
This engineered collaboration takes away the unreasonable burden often placed on non-specialists to come up with the goods (setting people up to fail) and instead places the emphasis on the artist(s) to broker the involvement of non-specialists in a way that is mutually satisfying and productive.

In this way it is possible to produce work that is both socially engaged and worthy of being called 'art'.

When the non-specialists have learning disabilities there is an even greater responsibility on their artist collaborators to support and broker their involvement with sensitivity and resourcefulness. The Living Room project was conceived as a way of presenting the creativity of people with learning disabilities (spontaneous, instinctive, and unconventional) in the best possible light.

Living Room is an ongoing experiment in presenting performance work by people with and without learning disabilities. It is inspired by an understanding that traditional modes of performance activity – reliant as they are on the ability to rationalise and memorise - are profoundly unsuited to people with learning disabilities. The challenge has been to conceive of new performance models and structures that would allow people with learning disabilities to contribute to, and collaborate in, a new kind of performance event *on their own terms*.

In first encountering salamanda tandem's work back in the mid 1990's, I felt a sense of recognition. It connected with a deeply held political instinct that creativity was not the preserve of a few but was more often an untapped resource in many. Here was a company that had developed a way of facilitating art that privileged the idea of informed choice over established notions of artistry. I saw artists confident enough to move away from the safe confines of their artistic practice and demystify their own processes back to a series of yes / no decisions. I saw facilitating artists happy to hand over critical decisions to people with learning disabilities. I saw a way of doing arts development as an open-ended adventure rather than an outcome driven road-map. I saw art as intrinsically connected to the lives of real people rather than as something added on.



Living Room Telford Aug 2006

The social model of disability argues that discrimination against people of difference takes place not because of who people are but rather how society relates to them. Adopting more reflexive and responsive approaches would alleviate many of the barriers people of difference are faced with. It should

also, in the realm of the arts, shift the burden for the achievement of quality arts practice away from disabled individuals working in isolation to a coalition of interested parties willing to conspire and collaborate in new kinds of practice on equal terms and forge new modes of critical acceptance.

What would this new practice look like?

One of the conditions of willing into existence modes of performance that are suitably responsive to and expressive of people with learning disabilities is that the resulting art does not easily fit into existing definitions of art practice. A project like Living Room fundamentally problematises what we think of as art. It contained moments of outstanding beauty and integrity but it couldn't be called 'theatre' or 'cinema' or 'dance'. Nor can the strange and mysterious choreography of the performance be attributed to one individual or director.

There were, of course, hands on this, very deliberate thinking behind this, that can be revealed to be the work of very skilled and thoughtful artists but the performance itself bore no trace of these individual fingerprints. This is the difference between designing the clearing for work to show up in (which is Isabel's gift) and showing up in the clearing yourself. This familiar act of trespass is the mistake made by many facilitating artists but it wasn't and isn't present in the work of Salamanda.

Similarly, my work with Arty Party is about defending the rare and sacred ground on which people with learning disabilities are allowed to have their moment. It is a space that is as much under threat from frustrated artists and their '*plans*' as it is from overbearing support workers and their '*help*'. Add to this list: audiences and their *expectations*, and arts funding bodies and their notions of *quality*, and we have much to guard against.

As difficult and against the grain as this work is we believe we are onto something that is about more than access to the arts for people with learning disabilities. This work cuts to the question of what it is to be an artist and a human being in the contemporary world.

This is what gives the work its edge and fascination.



## Part 2: - How the practice works

Isabel Jones



Living Room Leeds 2006

From an early age growing up with a disabled parent it seemed that people with disabilities had little opportunity to 'make a world' of their own or influence society and the wider culture. Educational and social experiences seemed to largely revolve around that person 'fitting in'. My early development of language and communication were inextricably linked to how my father received information through the senses. I was immersed in applying my imagination to a person with a wholly different perception. Later I came to realise that my father's blindness and deafness had taught me how to value, experience and view the world differently.

Our experience of disability as a family politicised us. For example; both my parents enjoyed painting; whilst my mother's work came home and was sold or displayed on the wall, my father had no access to artistic education. The one class he had attended at a local university was done in a therapy context and his work was kept for research purposes. Yet I saw how a single experience of touching Epstein's sculpture '*Lazarus*' lived on in his imagination for years. I had learned that disabled and able - bodied people were intrinsically equal but weren't treated so. As a teenager my parents and I went on to share a mutual interest in sculpture, and the place of touch in

developing the imagination. We travelled all over Britain in the 1970's campaigning for access to touch work in art gallery's like the National Gallery, Whitechapel and The Tate where this had been disallowed previously. I had begun to see that *'the arts could be fundamental not ornamental'*.

I felt driven in an attempt to be a part of making this change happen and I established the arts charity Salamanda Tandem in 1989, where a philosophy of reciprocal interaction became central to its work. This wasn't just a matter of people as appreciators of the art works of others; once accessed, these works had created a thirst in someone like my father for participation, which meant for me embracing the concept of 'people as creators' of their own art works.

So how can we facilitate and support the development of self realisation through a creative process in others? Key to this is finding an interface or form that is flexible, dynamic and two way enough to deal with the multiplicity of human interaction, and can maintain the unique qualities of each individual without normalising their creative response. I like the idea of 'World Making' here and it's a concept that is crucial to salamanda tandem's work with people, but world making only has meaning if first we can remove our preconceptions about what such a world is. I first came across the idea in about 1982 when I worked with child psychologists and children with developmental and emotional difficulties to generate their own images using a wide range of miniature objects of the world. Initially these objects generated playfulness, but after a while it was clear that the children became stuck with the trays, the objects, their scale and even the choice of objects available, they needed to explore further through embodied experience.

So what is the frame? In the early 1990's I came across the idea of 'acting on' in a book about touch by Stephen Montague. It suggested that we only learn as infants in an environment that is responsive to us. Of course this seems obvious, but in working with people with learning disabilities this means fundamentally altering our behavior. I began a 17 year journey to chip away at this and amongst other things found that interaction and playfulness were crucial, and that the body, voice and senses were the site for play. I asked how I could facilitate the right environment for the player and the play to become more playful.

*Show Partners Film* <sup>5</sup>.....

Here I use my body and voice to amplify Paul's actions so that he feels empowered to direct me. You can see in the film that play by its nature allows

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<sup>5</sup> Partners is a long term salamanda tandem method, arts project and training tool run in Nottingham and toured internationally. It uses the tools of body and voice to empower people on the autistic spectrum, their families and carers to create and communicate together.



the players 'Paul' and 'Isabel' to break the rules, creating new structures and mutually breaking out of the frame.

In 1990 I started working with people with profound and multiple disabilities – their subtle movements and sounds made the boxes of instruments and materials I used at that time seem clumsy and inaccessible. I needed to develop the possibilities around environments that could be responsive to a wide spectrum of individuals; I found through collaboration with other artists <sup>6</sup> that careful work with technology could potentially provide such an interface.

### *Show Living Room Stills*

In short, Living Room is where our work with sound and visual technology is at now; at least at the moment we recognize that it works best when alongside a human interface of movement and sound interaction specialists in order to support individual and group creativity. But whatever changes happen in the future, central to every decision is the principle that people need to be able to recognise themselves in the work and have permission to make their own journey.



living room Leeds June 2006

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<sup>6</sup> A number of Salamanda Associate artists have been involved long term in the Living Room collaboration; Co-Producer: Lisa Craddock, Composer: Duncan Chapman; Film maker: Stewart Collinson; Dancer: Julie Hood; Photographer: Geoffrey Fielding; Designer: Richard Hughes, and Pedagogy / Academic Development: Professor Mick Wallis, Leeds University

As part of my responsibilities in directing a process like Living Room, I need to make the process of creative engagement as transparent as possible. I attempt to do this by illuminating principles or structures that guide people to make choices moment by moment based on their experience in 'the here and now'. These could be simple ideas like; passing, copying, transforming, molding, finding places, making spaces, choosing partners, leading, following, conducting, directing, inhabiting, reversing, making smaller, making larger, making beginnings, making endings, being still, describing in words and then re-describing in movement, what did you see? What did you like? What do you want to change? Touch what you saw, be what you liked, change what you think needs changing, exploring the outside, and the inside, leaving the space, entering through a door, leaving by a window, arriving on wheels, disappearing, revealing, hiding, showing, touching, staying, do what you want, following the rules, and breaking them, what are the rules? Lying down, traveling, going nowhere, choosing, having a conversation or remaining silent. Endings --- atmospheres, connecting music in with movement. A certain chord speaks of an ending; we don't have to say it.

I believe that all humans share this knowledge and love of form; ritual, repetition and a sense of place, deep down we all know it, and we don't need to use front brain memory or learnt skill to articulate it. I think, this is intrinsically satisfying and unites us whether learning disabled or not. In what I do, I try to illuminate these forms in a non-verbal way so that people with a learning disability can learn how to 'act on' the environment around them and take charge of the creative space. Sometimes, in Living Room a narrative can help people hang things on, and other times the work is so exploratory that it becomes abstract and even chaotic to the onlooker, but not its participants.

In common to all my work, I aim to provide the space and structure for performers, co-collaborators and audience's imaginations to roam freely; to meander, dash, jump, go backwards, sideways, head long through, beyond, move wildly, carelessly, dive, hold, fly, spin and be still. Unlike my own dance as a child, these dancing bodies can't be censored, checked, fitted, measured, or tidied. As experiences evolve, each person is presented with an opportunity to draw on their imagination to find their own unmistakable meaning.

In conclusion; my early childhood experiences, and my professional collaborations as Artistic Director of salamanda tandem necessarily led me to ask questions; What is the context for this 'art making', - 'a drop of water in a desert?' The question necessarily led me towards malleable methods, and tools; and to illuminate the philosophy that underpinned the practice so that it could be passed on to others to make the work more ongoing. This too, is what had shaped salamanda tandem as a structure, helping to guide and maintain a growing culture around each key relationship in order to focus and deepen the inclusion of each individual. In Partners this meant the proper

involvement of Paul's mother, his peers, teachers, and carers and in Living Room the involvement of Arty Party both in the Living Room project and in their future development. Living room is an important project to Salamanda Tandem, and the collaboration with Kevin and Arty Party shows how fruitful long term collaborations can be in providing a supporting framework for disabled individuals to become creators.

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